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Turks and Caicos are Caribbean hideaway isles

By Ian Keown

COCKBURN TOWN, Grand Turk—In terms of nautical miles, the Turks and Caicos islands are closer to the United States than Puero Rico is but for most tourists they might as well be on Mars. A small band of knowledgeable island buffs and divers have, however, been sending back reports of untrampled beaches, unfished waters, and unexplored reefs. And that's exactly what you find in these kooky hideaway islands—one of the last haunts for those searching for unspoiled atmosphere—once you find out where and what the Turks and Caicos are.

Where is easy—550 miles southeast of Miami and 550 miles northwest of Puerto Rico. *What* is some three dozen islets and cays, flat pancakes of land—Grand Turk South Caicos, North Caicos, Providenciales—spread over 200 miles or so of ocean, the last trickle of dots in the Bahamas Out Island chain.

History, too, has given the islands a back seat. It's quite possible that Columbus sighted the Turks rather than San Salvador on his first voyage to the New World, but it's the latter which gets the honor; Ponce de Leon stopped off here in 1512, but left for Florida. For the inevitable pirates plundering the gold-laden galleons, the islets and channels of the Turks and Caicos were ideal hideouts. More recently salt rakers made fortunes here because of the islands' crucial "last chance to buy salt before Europe" location. Now the salt rakers too have gone. Until 1972 the islands were part of the Bahamas, but when that nation went independent, the Turks and Caicos opted to be a British colony, headed by a governor appointed by Queen Elizabeth.

WHAT THE ISLANDS have going for them is "the most spectacular continuous coral reef in the world," as the local tourist authorities call it. They may well be right, and the sight of the Caicos Banks as you come in by air presents marvelous vistas of multihued water, coral heads, sand bars, and white glistening beach that more than make up for the unprepossessing landscapes. It has been calculated that there are roughly 230 miles of beach among these islands—more than enough for the few hundred visitors who sun themselves here every year.

Of the three dozen islands that make up the Turks and Caicos group, only a few are inhabited. Still fewer cater to the needs of tourists with a half-dozen, informal inns, none with more than 25 rooms, most costing less than $60 double a night, MAP or modified American plan (breakfast and dinner included), even in winter.

The island of Grand Turk, and its harbor at Cockburn Town, is the capital of the group and still clings to the buccaneerish flavor of the West Indies before mass tourism came along. Cockburn Town's narrow main street winds between low, whitewashed walls or alongside the beach, past a collection of faded-pastel timber buildings dating from the 19th Century.

THERE ARE NO sights to speak of on Grand Turk—a NASA tracking station, a few deserted salt salinas—or on any of the other islands, except for an old British fort that slithered into the sea and has become the focal point of the island colony's first national park at Ft. George Cay. On these islands you are more likely to meet people than see sights, because the Belongers, as the 6,000 native-born islanders are called, are friendly, outgoing, and polite.

Since there is little night life, after-dark activity centers on the hotel bars and dining rooms, where you'll have plenty of opportunities to strike up conversations with yachtsmen and private pilots on their way to the Caribbean or South America, and with divers and beachcombers and the Belongers themselves.

On Grand Turk, the two most picturesque inns are converted 100-year-old houses, across the street from the beach. The Turks Head Inn has eight rooms, a gingerbread facade, and a shaded patio where you can have breakfast "anytime when you get up." The Salt Raker Inn, now run by former Hollywood press agent Doug Gordon and his wife, Doreen, has three rooms without private bath in the main house, half a dozen more with private facilities in garden bungalows. The inn's Bamboo Bar is a favorite watering place for British, Canadian, and American emigres. Both inns charge just under $40 double, MAP.

ON SOUTH CAICOS, the 14-room Admiral's Arms long has been a popular way station for yachtsmen and pilots; swimming pool and coral terrace overlook Cockburn's harbor where the island's fishermen land their lobsters (one of the most popular dishes on Turks and Caicos menus) and island schooners unload manlos, coconuts, papayas, and other tropical produce from Haiti. The Admiral's cabin-sized rooms rent for $46 double, MAP.

The poshest inn on the islands is the year-old, British-owned Prospect of Whitby on North Caicos. Its 20 rooms, in stone-and-timber bungalows facing a garden of cactus and palmettos, are spacious, handsomely furnished, and tastefully decorated. Ken McLeod, its young Scottish manager, rustles up splendid seafood buffets a couple of evenings a week. Other attractions are an English-style pub, freshwater pool, and a mile-long beach; the rates are $60 double, MAP.

Tribune Map

Pine Cay is 850 acres of scrubland with a landing strip like a washboard, but lined with a superb 2½ miles of pure white sand, protected by an offshore reef—and all of it reserved, since this is a private island, for the 24 guests of the Meridian Club. The 12 beachfront suites have private patios, and the modern timber-built clubhouse consists of a rustic dining room, games room, bar, and terrace-veranda. The club has a couple of marine biologists in residence, Chuck and Kathy Hesse, who are also certified diving instructors and enjoy showing off the marvels of their great unexplored reef to small groups of enthusiasts. "Shirts for dinner, but shoes optional," although the club's daily rate is $80 double, including all meals—highest in the islands.

Your first stop in the Turks and Caicos (which you can reach via Mackey Airlines from Miami or Fort Lauderdale) is Providenciales, in the west, and you leave from Grand Turk, in the east. The local airline, currently operating under the name TIGAS, flies a 7-seat, twin-engine "Islander" on a circuit of most of the islands twice a day. You can get current information and rates for flights and hotels from the Turks & Caicos Tourist Office, Dept. C.T., 7777 W. Talcott Av., Chicago 60631.

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